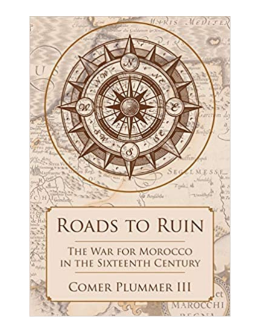


Medieval Articles
- The Battle of Tondibi
- The Battle of Pinkie Cleugh
- The Siege of Mazagan, 1562
- Sharif and the Sultan of Fishermen
- Ninety Five Theses and Revolution
- Muslim Invasion of Iberia
- Cairo's Fortress on the Mountain

Comer Plumer Articles
- The Battle of Tondibi
- The Siege of Mazagan, 1562
- Sharif and the Sultan of Fishermen

Comer Plummer Books



Roads to Ruin: The War for Morocco in the Sixteenth Century

Home / Medieval / **The Siege of Mazagan, 1562**

The Siege of Mazagan, 1562
By Comer Plummer, III

It was a pleasant day of early spring in Lisbon and King Sebastian I of Portugal and the Algarve was making the most of it, bounding about the gardens of the Ribeira Palace. His elfish form disappeared momentarily behind the hedges and then into the shadows of the King's Tower before popping out again, diminutive rapier in hand, the shock of copper hair tussled. Normally, the sights and sounds of the Tagus River and nearby shipyard would have been the boy's primary diversions, but this day was different. Today, there were a thousand imaginary enemies at hand, and the King was determined to slay them all. The host was a Moorish one, godless savages and unruly fighters, and he was the crusading King Manuel I, the one they called *The Fortunate*, under whose rule the empire reached its zenith. Over 40 years after Manuel's death the country still bore his stamp, right down to the late Gothic architecture, a florid mélange of Italian, Spanish, and Flemish accents to traditional Portuguese style. *Manueline*, they called it.

As Sebastian leapt by, parrying and lunging, gardeners looked up, revealing weathered faces and furtive looks that were strangely servile and prideful. As the boy rounded the west side of the palace, that facing the river, he came upon knights and men-at-arms milling about the entrance. Recognizing their assailant, the men threw up their arms in mock surrender, sending the scowling boy off in search of another encounter. Usually, the eight-year old King was only permitted so much of this nonsense, but, under the circumstances, he was allowed to indulge. News from Morocco had everyone in a state of excitement.

The Council of the Realm was in session that morning, chaired by Queen Catherine, Sebastian's grandmother. Catherine, a Castilian and aunt of King Philip of Spain, had been regent these past five years, since the sudden death of her husband, King John III. The late king's younger brother, Cardinal Henry, was also present. The two did not get along. Henry coveted the crown, and as the preeminent ecclesiastical figure in the land, he had the clergy on his side. As the senior member of the House of Aviz-Beja, the Cardinal was also the leader of the Portuguese 'nationalists' at court, which is to say those nobles hostile to Spanish influence over any and all aspects of Portuguese life; by extension, this included Catherine. From the outset, Henry was a pebble in the Queen Regent's shoe, and she would eventually tire of his backbiting and intrigues and turn the regency over to him.

But in the spring of 1562, all were together on the Moroccan crisis. It was the galvanizing force at court. Early that spring spies reported the convergence of columns of troops toward Mazagan, or El Jadida, as the Moors called it. This Portuguese outpost, the furthest south along the coast, was one of the most heavily garrisoned at 700 men, but the Moors were reported to be as many as 100,000. Urgent measures were required.

Such crises were not altogether unfamiliar. By that time the Portuguese had a long experience in Morocco - almost 150 years. It began in 1415, the year that King John I led an army into Ceuta, a port city at the mouth of the Strait of Gibraltar. This was the first step in Portugal's inexorable march south, propelled subsequently by the vision of Prince Henry, 'The Navigator'. The explorations he sponsored of the West African coast would propel her mariners in an astonishingly short period of time beyond hitherto impenetrable geographic barriers all the way to Brazil and to China.

Portugal's policy in Morocco was problematic almost from the start. To begin with, Ceuta may have been grandly dubbed the “key to the whole Mediterranean Sea,” but possession of it did not confer some great strategic advantage to Portugal. [1] And the wealth expected to be gleaned from trade was an act of faith. Other than wheat and livestock, Morocco has little to offer. Vision of camel trains laden with the riches of West Africa dazzled, but Ceuta was a long way from the terminus of trans-Saharan caravans.

The emotional aspect was not to be discounted. North Africa was *terra irredenta* for Portugal. It was only natural that they carry the Neo-Reconquest into the Islamic Maghreb and reclaim the lands of their Visigoth ancestors; and Portugal had a series of Papal bulls, or decrees, recognizing her rights to crusade there. [2]

There was one practical argument for this policy, and though unarticulated by the 'expansionists' it was probably the decisive one. Since 1411, when a treaty ended a war in Spain, the king was saddled with thousands of battle-hardened warriors and their sons – all of whom were very much in need of fresh diversions and new horizons. The feudal society, simply put, required a theater of war.

There were a few skeptics, of course. The naysayers had their doubts. Mostly, they pointed to the expected cost of such an enterprise. They doubted about the long term profitability of a North African venture, and saw the final result as nothing more than a drain on the state's coffers. And, privately, they wondered whether territory captured in Moslem North Africa could be held very long in the face of certain and fierce resistance. [3]

In the end, the expansionist viewpoint prevailed. Ceuta was conquered and made into the first of what would be many

moved on...to Ghana, Mozambique, Brazil, India, Malacca and beyond. Ceuta was left behind, somehow in its proximity an afterthought, isolated and unhappy. The skeptics had been prescient, though it would take some time for organized domestic resistance to seriously challenge Portugal's presence.

By 1562 the political landscape in Morocco had changed significantly. The succession of two weak Berber dynasties the Portuguese had known, the Merenids and the Wattasids, had been replaced by a militant one dominated by an Arab clan. These 'Saadians' rose from the Sous Valley of Southern Morocco as a jihadist coalition of Arab and Berber tribes under the leadership of a *sharif*, or male descendant of the Prophet Mohammed. Their stated purpose was the eviction of the Portuguese, whose control of the major coastal ports allowed them to dominate the country's foreign trade. For a time they served the Moroccan sultan in Fez. Eventually, the Saadian jihad became a rival political movement.

Slowly, the Saadians extended their control. In 1510, they made their capital at Tidsi, near Taroudant, and began to organize a government and a regular army. Using local revenues, namely from sugar cane, they managed to purchase small numbers of firearms and cannon from European smugglers (The Portuguese imposed an arms embargo on the Saadians.). By 1524 they were strong enough declare their independence and march against the sultan's primary vassal in the south, the Hintatas. That year they took Marrakech and made that city their capital. Another breakthrough came in 1541, when the Saadians captured the Portuguese fort at Agadir. This victory was the proverbial wake up call for the Portuguese, who until that time believed that naval superiority and better artillerymen and sappers made them impregnable behind their stone walls. The Moors' long-range cannon, some purchased from France and England, others fabricated locally, dispelled that notion. In taking Agadir, the Saadians broke the Portuguese maritime stranglehold and opened the principal port of southern Morocco to foreign trade. With their newfound wealth, and plenty of arms and ammunition, the Saadians marched north, capturing Fez in 1554, and gradually unifying the country under their rule.

Sultan Abdallah Al Ghalib succeeded to the Saadian throne in 1557. After consolidating his power and fending off incursions by the neighboring Turks in Algeria, the Sultan turned his attention to domestic politics. Ultimately, his power over the fractious tribes depended upon *baraka*, or evidence of divine favor. Nothing would serve a Commander of the Faithful better than chasing the infidels at Mazagan into the sea. The fact that he could not take the field, probably due to his severe asthma, was a technicality. His son and heir, Moulay Mohammed, would command the army.

Upon receiving news that a massive Saadian army was preparing to march on Mazagan, Queen Catherine conferred with her counselors and took steps, ordering the evacuation of women and children, as well as the horses, and the counter-mining of the ramparts; the governor, Alvaro de Carvalho was recalled for consultations; seven companies of 200 men each were to be raised for the garrison's reinforcement; and the fleet was ordered to mobilize. Since the main body would take time to marshal, an advanced party was sent ahead, consisting of about 100 knights. [4]

Additional reports followed. Ruy de Sousa de Carvalho, brother of Alvaro, and acting commander of the Mazagan fort, confirmed the Sultan's plans in a dispatch after being tipped off by the *caid*, or governor, of Azemmour. Several weeks later, after the Moorish host arrived and laid siege to the fort, another messenger, a Franciscan monk, appeared in court bearing a report describing initial and unsuccessful assault upon the citadel four days earlier.[5]

These two reports created a sensation. For some weeks, since the siege began on March 21, the plight of the beleaguered fort had been practically the only topic at court, prompting many of Lisbon's finest to come forth to offer their services. Now, with the report of a few hundred stalwart men turning back a tide of thousands of fanatical heathens, volunteers began to appear from every corner of the land. Some help was solicited, most was not. Scores of *fidalgos*, or young gentlemen of the nobility, bivouacked at Ribeira, badgering officials and petitioning for appointments; at the docks they tried to bluff or bribe their way onto ships bound for Morocco. A few hired their own transport and departed in secrecy. When the crown failed to demonstrate sufficient eagerness for their services, many offered to pay their own way to Mazagan. It was like the good old crusading days, or at least as legend remembered it. While the surge of patriotic zeal was refreshing, at a point it was unhelpful, creating competition for scarce resources, driving up prices, and generally hampering the logistics of the expedition. The Queen was eventually obliged to order that no ship depart for Morocco without her express approval. [6]

Suddenly, service in Morocco was again in vogue. It was quite a change. In the decades following the occupation of Ceuta, the Moroccan frontieras had become an imperial backwater. This was not a land of opportunity, nor was it a money-making enterprise for the Kingdom. Quite the contrary. These garrisons and the communities they spawned had difficulty feeding themselves; most became dependent on the Mother Country for subsistence.

Fast money, not survival, was on everyone's mind. This was an age of fantastic opportunity, and according to feudal custom, it was the sovereign who doled out the action in the form of *doações*, or endowments such as land grants of tribute-paying villages, and *merces*, an award of an office or other income-generating benefit. It all seemed quite natural at the time. Only years later would such a military system, with its comingling personal enrichment with military responsibility, come to be understood as incompatible with professionalism. As French navigator Francois Pyrard observed of the Portuguese system:

> most of them, nay all, captains, masters, master's mates, keepers, even the marines and

> gunners, and the others get their offices by favor, or for money, or in recompense for their service or past losses; also, that these offices are given to the widows or children of such who have died on voyages or elsewhere in the service of the King; then do these sell them to whom they will, without judging his capacity or merit. [7]

Such awards were the path to notoriety and wealth. Those fortunate enough to be in the game stood a chance at a comfortable life, provided, of course, that they survived long sea voyages, storms, pirates, dysentery, tropical diseases, hostile natives, and a dozen other hazards. In Morocco, a man might find all of the dangers and physical hardships and few of the expected benefits: shares of booty and ransoms, or land grants, membership in a military order, or a command, perhaps even a knighthood. [8] The meager opportunities in these small garrison outposts were siphoned off by a cabal of four families, the Meneses, Coutinhos, Noronhas, and Mascarenhas, who monopolized the governorships. [9] In Morocco, as elsewhere, the royal governors were lords over their domains. They picked their key men, the knights and men-at-arms, controlled opportunities for plunder, and they distributed the loot. If a gentleman was not in such a retinue, he was, generally speaking, out of luck.

Only the greenest of fidalgos or the most desperate of desperados would settle to be cooped up in a seaside fortress in Morocco, playing cards and stealing sheep, when there were adventures and riches to be had in Brazil, India, and Asia. With the best and brightest, or at least the most ambitious, elsewhere, these frontieras attracted less conventional talent, and the garrisons came to be a mix of young adventurers, rogues, paupers, criminals, and exiles. Not surprisingly, predatory practices, raids and foraging parties, became the economic base. Most were sanctioned by the governor, but some were private affairs, conducted by rogue entrepreneurs. The affect of these activities on Portuguese relations with locals and efforts to cultivate tribal alliances needs hardly be stated.

If the Moroccan fronieras had any real utility it provided a place where the young elite could gain practical military experience. This was where many junior fidalgos had their first experience in garrison living, in conducting diplomacy with local tribal leaders, patrolling, and combat. For the *frontieros*, or men of the garrison outposts, Morocco became a kind of training ground for future service in Brazil and the East. Additionally, the young nobles, particularly those of the service nobility, relied upon the 'little war' to build their military records in order to claim *doações* and *merces* from the king. [10]

The crown's experience with Ceuta, however, in no way stifled the Neo-Reconquest. After several tries, in 1471 the Portuguese finally wrest Tangiers from the sultan of Fez; that same year they took Arzila. Portugal's territorial designs on Morocco were formally recognized by Castile at the Treaty of Alcaçovas and upheld later in the Treaty of Tordesillas. This policy found its greatest sponsor in Manuel I, who became king in 1495. Manuel considered the conquest of Morocco his destiny, and under his rule Portuguese expansion reached its crescendo. Forts were established at Agadir, at Mogador (Essaouira), and at Agouz at the mouth of the Tensift River. The *feitorias*, or trading posts, at Safi and Mazagan were expanded into fortresses; and Azemmour was seized in 1513. From Agadir, the Portuguese also raided as far as Marrakech.

The graffiti scrawled by her soldiers on the mud walls of Marrakech was emblematic of Portugal's predicament. She aimed at conquest, yet could manage no more than a transient presence in the interior. Beyond the supporting range of the navy, the Portuguese army was ineffective. Twice they had tried to establish bases in the hinterlands, at Graciosa on the Loukkos River (1489), and at Mamora (Mehdia) on the Sebou River (1515) and both had been dismal failures.

There were those who saw the truth and advocated giving up on these forts, or at least a substantial contraction. One of them was none other than Vasco De Gama, the great explorer who had first made landfall in India. De Gama had advocated back in 1522 contraction as a means of coping with the mounting expenditures of the state. [11] Eventually, the Moroccan frontieras came to cost the crown each year a sum equal to the gold production of its West African feitorias, a staggering figure that amounted to about three-quarters of the budget for its entire India Ocean enterprise. [12] Something had to give.

Despite the mounting urgency to act, for several years the nothing was done. The topic was highly controversial, and particularly contentious among the nobles and the military orders. The clergy was, of course, dead set against the surrender of any reclaimed territory to the Muslims. The crown was in a state of paralysis. John III agonized over the issue, buffeted by hard liners and pragmatists. One thing he would not consider was a wholesale withdrawal. Royal obligations precluded it. Ceuta, for instance, was the seat of a bishopric and had been given to the Order of Christ. In time, the King and his councilors warmed to the notion that a smaller footprint might not contradict the crusading spirit of the crown that helped win several Papal bulls. These documents were critical to the national psyche: they justified Portugal's expansionist activities and provided Papal recognition of its sovereignty and ecclesiastical rights over its conquered territories. [13]

The Saadian conquest of Agadir finally impelled John III to act, and he requested the Pope's permission to abandon several of the forts. By 1550 Portugal retained only three outposts, Mazagan, Tangiers and Ceuta, places that offered the best anchorage and natural defenses. But, dreams died hard: Even then, after so many disappointments and so much wasted treasure, some imagined these places as launch points for a future conquest of the Moroccan interior.

Mazagan's condition was in many ways typical of the Portuguese experience in Morocco. Under a virtual state of siege, the garrison and the *moradores*, the civilian population of settlers, retired soldiers, and temporary residents, were confined to the 250 by 300 square meters of the citadel and the small garden plots outside the ramparts. [14] It was a

Life on the Moroccan frontier was tense. The population eked out an existence through various local industries, such as fishing, raising livestock, cultivating strips of land around the fortress. When possible, they traded with the *Mouros de paz*, or peaceful Moors, for meat, vegetables, and textiles, which eased their deprivations. Since war was expected to pay for itself, Lisbon felt no obligation to regularize the resupply of her garrisons; besides, the crown lacked the resources to do so. Ships came infrequently, and failed to provide for the basic upkeep of the garrison and the fort, upon which the settlement depended for its existence. The city dwelt on the edge of penury. Bouts of starvation and epidemic were frequent.

Insecurity was the root of the problem. The Portuguese trading empire depended on a 'divide and conquest' strategy of cultivating alliances among local chiefs and tribes as a means to secure its coastal presence. In Morocco the business of offering trade and protection in exchange for tribute enjoyed some success when the land was in civil turmoil. With the consolidation of the Saadian state, however, fewer and fewer tribes were willing to do business with the infidel. Long before the fall of Agadir, the quasi-protectorate state of southern vassal tribes had disintegrated. Now, the men of Mazagan dared not venture from the fortress without military escort, and even then they stayed close to its walls. Like moths to a flame, jihadists migrated to Mazagan to perform their religious duty, so much so that two villages sprung up nearby to accommodate their needs. The gardens the Portuguese cultivated outside the ramparts were continually sabotaged, and their hunting and foraging for wood resulted in frequent skirmishes. [15] The occasional pot shots against sentinels and other targets of opportunity were a constant menace.

For the most part, the Portuguese wisely kept to the environs of their fortress. Once, they had done otherwise and paid the price. On March 30, 1547, the governor, Luis de Loureiro, allowed himself to be lured into a trap when he injudiciously sallied from the fort to chase down 200 horsemen who had appeared before the walls. Loureiro led more than 400 men into an ambush by several thousand Moorish horsemen who slaughtered his force nearly to the man. The governor, his horse shot from beneath him, only escaped by taking the mount of a subordinate. [16]

While it was constantly harassed, Mazagan attract little attention from both the Wattasids and the Saadians. The enclave's relative isolation, the lure of more convenient targets, and a border war between Morocco and the Ottoman province of Algiers, served its interests. By Abdallah Al Ghalib's time, the situation had changed. Jihad against the Portuguese had once more become a domestic political imperative, and, as the only Christian foothold left south of Tangiers, Mazagan was perceived to be the most vulnerable target.

The lessons of Agadir were clear: the Portuguese had to solve the tactical problem posed to its forts by Moroccan long-range artillery. This was a common challenge to military minds of the day throughout Europe and the Mediterranean. This century's almost Darwinian struggle between offensive and defensive innovations covered just about every facet of war, including infantry and cavalry tactics and associated weaponry. Each contest produced its incremental adaptations and counter-adaptations. With regard to siegecraft, the sieges such as Agadir and, most prominently, Constantinople, revealed the ascendancy of long-range guns over the traditional high masonry walls of antiquity. [17] By the middle of the 16th century new methods of building were providing greater protection from siege guns and incorporating structures stout enough to accommodate heavy cannon in the defense.

In resolving to keep Mazagan, the Portuguese crown determined to reinforce it with the latest methods of military construction. To that end, in 1541, in the months following the fall of Agadir, they imported an Italian specialist and began work on a fortress of the newest design trend, the *trace italienee*. The star shape was the key concept. At the apex of each point was a triangular bastion that provided overlapping fire and mutual support between these strong points. [18] Also, the construction of walls was lower, about 24 feet high, and wider, on the average 30 feet thick, and angled in places to deflect incoming shot. The bastions and crenellated walls offered the usual protection against missile weapons, but they were also built wide and heavy enough to accommodate cannon. And, the Portuguese had plenty of guns, including 100 bronze pieces reclaimed from the abandoned forts of Safi, Azemmour, and Mogador. [19] To compensate for lower walls, the ditch surrounding for fort was widened, and a mound, or glacis, added to the far side. The downward slope of the glacis toward the enemy both served to shield much of the low wall from direct fire and provide greater concealment for defenders operating from the trench system. [20] The wider trench also made tunneling more difficult: fresh air hardly reached men toiling in the deepest recesses and long tunnels collapsed more easily.

The Sultan's forces began to converge on Mazagan in early March. The Moroccan army was reported to number as many as 120,000 men, 37,000 cavalry, 24 cannon, and 13,500 sappers. Given the size of similar Saadian military operations to that time, however, a figure of half this number is probably more reliable. To underscore the size of this army, it was said that in the Moorish camp 110 wells were dug to supply their men and beasts with drinking water. By comparison, the Portuguese forces were a pittance, less than a thousand at the outset of fighting and numbering no more than 2,700. [21]

The Moors built a stockade on hillock overlooking the city, from which they deployed their heavy guns, including two of the massive *maïmuna*. These long-range pieces, used with such devastating affect at Agadir, hurled stone balls equivalent to a caliber of 420 mm. Rounding out the battery were two trebuchets, a type of catapult that, while obsolete, was nonetheless quiet effective in hurling large stones and incendiary pots over the city walls, producing fire and havoc within. [22] Even before the artillery was in position, the sappers began digging approach trenches toward

the citadel.

By the 21st of March the guns were in place and the attackers were dug in before the Portuguese trench. The Moors were able to move under cover from their camp along a number of communication trenches that converged into a main trench line that spanned the city perimeter. The battle began that day with a furious cannonade, and the fire continued unabated for several days and nights.

The Moors worked with urgency. They were not content to rely upon their artillery to slowly blast down the walls of the citadel. Perhaps it was the terrain that made them anxious. Unlike at Agadir, where the Moroccan guns owned the heights, there was no dominating topography here that might ultimately assure success. Then again, they might have sought to preempt Portuguese reinforcements; or consideration might have gone to the start of Ramadan on May 5th. [23]

Sunrise on the morning of March 26th revealed the product of the din of the previous night. The defenders knew that the enemy had been at work out there in the dark. Now, in the early light, their curiosity was satisfied. Every man of the garrison must have climbed to a vantage point to marvel at the immense dirt wall the Moors had thrown up around the land ward side of the fort. In the following weeks, under the harassing fire of Portuguese gun fire and artillery, Moorish soldiers and civilians alike piled on sandbags and fascine. According to one witness: “Each cavalrymen or infantryman brought by the hour twenty loads of earth or of stone; women and children covered the paths like ants, and came loaded with faggots of wood.” [24] Eventually, the height of the wall exceeded that of the battlements of the fort.

Day by day, the coil tightened around the crumbling citadel. The close-in fight was a war of attrition. Across a no-man's land of perhaps 100 meters in width, sharpshooters exchanged fire and cannon traded blows. The Moors brought up field guns which they dug in along the crest of the dirt wall. From there, they began to pick off Portuguese guns and chunk away the stone merlons, exposing the defenders to arquebus shot. The Portuguese responded with counter-battery fire, but, other than the occasional shrapnel of dried reeds and sticks, their guns appeared to make little impression upon the earthen barricade. From afar, heavy guns and trebuchets raked and burned the city. Wood structures - parapet floors, gun carriages, and buildings - disappeared in flames. Those structures that did not burn were dismantled for use in shoring up walls and rebuilding platforms. Shelter, from both the elements and from the hail of missile objects, became a problem. As a Portuguese witness to the battle, described:

> …they gave us an exhibition with their artillery, which was really something to see, since we were surrounded from sea to sea, and their display took place all around our fortress, from their trenches and ramparts, with which they had occupied the whole field of battle from the outside, right up to our own trench system. From there and in front they shot at us by day and by night with their artillery and with two trebuchets, with which they did us much harm, both to our housing and to our personnel; and their shots contributed greatly to our fear, because the bullets rained down from the sky like hailstones, and with such fury that everything they hit below was smashed into a thousand pieces. Their musket fire never ceased to rain on us, and with it they did a lot of damage… [25]

Despite the hail of fire, the defenders' losses were relatively minor. The fort was doubtless to be credited, but most of the eye witness accounts, written by Jesuits and Franciscans, emphasized the spiritual. They recorded a number of miraculous near misses, which collectively reinforced the notion of Divine favor. According to one story, a bullet, probably a ricochet, spent itself against a priest's skin, leaving only a blemish; in another, a shell crash through a roof and struck a pot where a man was washing, taking off the handle and leaving the bather unscathed; shells hit where men sat seconds earlier; other shells landed in crowded areas without causing casualties. [26]

The attackers too felt a sense of the Divine, but their losses began to mount, despite the trenches and berms built to offer some protection. As the battle progressed, Portuguese cannoniers began to find their range, and they pounded the Moorish field works and the stockade, and knocked out many guns. The cross fire from the bastions made the no-man's land a killing field.

As this drama unfolded, underneath their feet another fight was taking place. From the start, it was clear to both sides that the Moulay Mohammad's best hope of penetrating the citadel wall was through the use of underground mines. Moorish sappers tunneled relentlessly forward toward a few chosen breach points as the Portuguese dug out to intercept them in a fan of shafts set at calculated intervals. Barrels of black powder were to be detonated at the end of these shafts: the Moors intended to cause the collapse of part of the city wall; the Portuguese aimed to blow sky high any Moorish sappers they detected. While only a few subterranean skirmishes were recorded, the grim nature of this work made it seem a whole lot more important to the outcome. In the mind of one defender, “We fought more below ground than above it.” [27]

If long-range artillery and mines failed to do the job, the Moors had another, less conventional solution to the city walls – an elevated causeway between the dirt wall and the Portuguese bulwark. Constructed of sand bags and fascine, twenty meters in width, with its sides built up as protection against enfilade fire, once completed this 'road' would allow a mass charge over the killing field and right up to the top of the walls. [28] It did not take long for the Portuguese to grasp the seriousness of the threat. To impede its advance they hurled lighted torches and “pitch and balls of tar to feed the flames.” The Moors countered by replacing the wood bundles with evergreen cane and parsley

point where it allowed the Moors to look directly into the center of the fort.

For the Portuguese, these were desperate, and ultimately heroic, times. Alvaro de Carvalho had returned with reinforcements, and he led a spirited defense. By day, those not furiously engaged in keeping the Moors at bay were hunkered down out of view, behind the walls, in the stone churches, down in the cistern, or in some other shelter. At night, while a few men remained on guard, some on the parapets on the lookout for scaling ladders, and others below ground listening for the scraping of an approaching mine shaft, the rest of the city was at work, porting supplies and ammunition from ships off shore, tending to the sick and dying, resupplying the guns, and repairing the defenses. They gathered earth, stones, wood from the city, even manure, to camouflage the guns, and “casks, baskets and bushwood” to plug holes blasted through the walls. Despite the unrelenting stress, morale remained high. A spirit of team work prevailed, and the high born and commoners labored side-by-side. [30] The navy kept the garrison supplied. Jesuits and Franciscan monks provided medical care and religious services. The arrival of reinforcements, including some illustrious knights, bore witness that Portugal was with them.

By April 16th, Moulay Mohammed judged that the fort had been sufficiently softened up for a general assault. His initial effort stalled when the Portuguese detonated two huge mines that flooded the attacker's trenches with sea water. The fighting was renewed the following dawn and lasted into the early afternoon. The Moors pressed in from all sides, and every available man, including the walking wounded, was thrust into the fight. A Jesuit participant recounted:

> Matters came to a head when Ruy de Sousa came up to me, all covered in wounds and burns, and told me: “Father, it's time now for your Reverence to grab a spear and join the fighting” I answered him: “My dear sir, I am doing my duty here.” [31]

While severely battered, the citadel held out and the Moors retired to regroup. The Carvalho brothers were worried: the Holy Ghost Bastion and the battlements on the south side were badly damaged, and the enemy had taken control of the Portuguese trench and began to tunnel close to the foundations of the walls.

The second general attack came on the 24th, and initially it fared no better when a massive Portuguese mine erupted under the enemy's main trench, blowing dozens of men to pieces and causing the collapse of part of the trench line and much of the causeway. Suddenly, a throng of Moorish soldiers who had assembled for the main attack was exposed. As a Portuguese witness wrote with evident satisfaction:

> From this unexpected occurrence [the mine explosion] they were quite beside themselves, as was to be expected, and were caught in the crossfire of our artillery and our muskets, since the trench of theirs that covered them was flattened by the force of the mine, and the greater part of their roadway was destroyed, for until then our crossfire was unable to do them any harm, as they were shielded by the trench works that the mine destroyed. But from then on the artillery sported with them, loaded with iron chains and metal darts and boulders, that killed them cruelly. [32]

The Moors rallied, however, when one of the defenders' power stores caught fire. The explosions and flames wounded scores of men and sowed a general confusion, for many men on both sides thought the explosions to be from a mine underneath the city wall. The attackers surged forward from the dirt wall to the citadel through the withering cross fire. Finding no breach, they threw up a few scaling ladders and a handful of intrepid men managed to climb up and establish a foothold atop the parapet. More attackers struggled to join them, and a stiff battle at close quarters ensued for several hours. However, the Moors failed to build momentum; eventually, the ladders were blown away by Portuguese guns, trapping those at the bridgehead. No quarter was given. Seeing their men butchered and their banners thrown down, the Moors below broke off and began to stream away. A Jesuit witness wrote, “...they were completely routed, and ran away from the battle toward their own trenches. And their rout was well enough understood by our men for some of them to volunteer to sally forth and finish off their defeat.” [33]

With this reverse, the battle was essentially over, for the Moors had no more tricks to play and their ammunition was running low. Desultory attacks continued until May 1st, a reflection of a princely denial of defeat that served only to deepen the general misery. Moulay Mohammad lingered in the field until breaking camp four days later, on May 5th, the first day of Ramadan.

The siege had lasted 46 days, and it was a complete failure for Abdallah Al Ghalib. Though he would survive the setback, and reign another twelve years, he would not mount another significant military campaign. Dying of an asthma attack in 1574, Al Ghalib would be remembered somewhat ironically as a ruler who bought peace and stability.

At Mazagan, the Portuguese had regained the upper hand they had lost at Agadir. Their domination of the seas and superiority in artillery and counter-mining had never been compromised. The critical difference was modern fortifications. The lessons learned from Agadir re-established the qualitative gap between the Portuguese and the Moroccans in siege warfare, one they would hold, like Mazagan, for the next 200 years. Casualty figures are instructive: The number of Moors who died in the siege was never recorded, but they must have numbered in the thousands. Portuguese losses were, by comparison, minor. For example, according to Mendonça, in the four-hour battle of April 24th the Portuguese suffered 72 casualties[34] , among them 12 dead. Not only did Mazagan survive against an experienced, well equipped and numerically superior foe, but most of the garrison did as well.

While the victory was a source of immense national pride, it was also a reminder of the precarious state of affairs in North Africa, and one largely of a European making. The Portuguese echoed the bitter refrain of Agadir:

> For the last 20 years, Britain, France and other nations have traded in Barbary for huge profits. In defiance of Divine and human law, they have brought the Sharif such quantity of offensive and defensive arms, tin and other materials to make artillery, lances, and oars that the Saracens are now better armed with artillery and munitions than Christians. Because of this, Saracens, once poorly armed, lacking in artillery, and uninstructed in the art of the bastion, have won all the towns and cities located on the ocean coast...[35]

But, for young Sebastian, it was all a game. The tales of chivalrous feats of arms struck a chord in his young mind. In the years ahead many renowned soldiers and veterans of the fight would regale the young man with tales of heroism. The images of that spring would linger, like the mirage of the Neo-Reconquest; sixteen years later, on the field of Ksar el-Kebir, they would transform the siege of Mazagan into the most pyrrhic of victories.

* * *

Hide Footnotes and Bibliography

Footnotes

[1]. Bailey W. Diffie and George D. Winius. Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 53.

[2]. A.R. Disney, A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Kindle edition, sections 206-211.

[3]. Diffie, 49-53.

[4]. John R.C. Martyn, The Siege of Mazagao (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 10, 117-8.

[5]. Ibid, 102, 111.

[6]. Edward McMurdo, History of Portugal, Vol III (London: Sampon Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington,1889), 164.

[7]. David J. Trim, The Chivalric Ethos and the Development of Military Professionalism (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 113.

[8]. Malyn Newitt, A History of Overseas Portuguese Expansion, 1400-1668 (Oxon: Routledge, 2005),14.

[9]. Disney, sections 384-386.

[10]. Ibid, sections 378-379.

[11]. Tom Gallagher, Portugal: A Twentieth-century Interpretation (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 7.

[12]. Barnaby Rogerson, The Last Crusaders: East, West and the Battle for the Center of the World (New York: Overloo Press, 2009), Kindle edition, sections 3910-3915.

[13]. Newitt, 30.

[14]. Rogerson, sections 3917-3923.

[15]. First Encyclopedia of Islam (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987), 423.

[16]. Christian Feucher, Mazagan, 1514-1956 (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011), 42.

[17]. Comer Plummer, Constantinople: Citadel at the Gate. https://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/medieval/articles/citadelatthegate.aspx. Access 13 June 2013.

[18]. Portuguese City of Mazagan (El Jadida), UNESCO Web Site. Accessed 13 Jun 2013. http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1058. Presently, the fort has only four bastions. The fifth, the Governor's Bastion by the main entrance, was destroyed by the Portuguese in 1769 prior to abandoning the city to the Moroccans.

[19]. Rogerson, sections 3916-3923.

[20]. Trim, 110.

[21]. Weston F. Cook, The One Hundred Years War for Morocco: Gunpowder and Military Revolution in the Early Modern Muslim Word (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994), 226.

[22]. Martyn, 186-7.

[23]. Ramadan: 969 Hajiri. http://habibur.com/hijri/969/9/Accessed 14 June 2013.

[24]. Feucher, 43.

[25]. Martyn, 108.

[26]. Ibid, 158.

[27]. Cook, 226.

[28]. Martyn, 113.

[29]. Ibid, 113, 191.

[30]. Ibid, 191-2.

[31]. Ibid, 170.

[32]. Ibid, 115.

[33]. Ibid, 120.

[34]. Ibid, 155. The number of wounded is probably higher, since by another account some 100 injured were reported in just the powder blasts alone.

[35]. Cook, 226.

Works Cited

Cook, Weston F. The One Hundred Years War for Morocco: Gunpowder and Military Revolution in the Early Modern Muslim Word . Boulder: Westview Press, 1994.

Diffie, Bailey W. and George D. Winius. Foundations of the Portuguese Empire, 1415-1580. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977.

Disney, A.R.. A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. (Kindle edition)

Feucher, Christian. Mazagan, 1514-1956. Paris: L'Harmattan, 2011.

First Encyclopedia of Islam. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987.

Gallagher, Tom. Portugal: a twentieth-century interpretation. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983.

Martyn, John R.C. The Siege of Mazagao. New York: Peter Lang, 1994.

McMurdo, Edward. History of Portugal, Vol III. London: Sampon Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington. 1889.

Newitt, Malyn. A History of Overseas Portuguese Expansion, 1400-1668. Oxon: Routledge, 2005.

Plummer, Comer. Constantinople: Citadel at the Gate. Accessed 18 June 2013. http://www.militaryhistoryonline.com/medieval/articles/citadelatthegate.aspx

Portuguese City of Mazagan (El Jadida), UNSECO Web Site. Accessed 13 June 2013. http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1058.

Trim, David J. The Chivalric Ethos and the Development of Military Professionalism. Leiden: Brill, 2003

Ramadan: 969 Hajiri. Accessed 14 June 2013. http://habibur.com/hijri/969/9/.

Rogerson, Barnaby. The Last Crusaders: East, West and the Battle for the Center of the World. New York: Overlook Press, 2009

* * *

Published online: 10/20/2013.

Written by Comer Plummer. If you have questions or comments on this article, please contact Comer Plummer at: comer_plummer@hotmail.com.

About the author:
Comer Plummer is a retired US Army Officer. He served from 1983 to 2004 as both an armor officer and Middle East/Africa Foreign Area Officer. He is currently employed as a DoD civilian and living in Maryland with his wife and son.

* Views expressed by contributors are their own and do not necessarily represent those of MilitaryHistoryOnline.com.